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The Importance of Local Initiative In Environmental Management

Robert W. Fri
Acting Administrator
Environmental Protection Agency

The Environmental Improvement Awards you are presenting today are highly significant signs of progress in the struggle to end pollution. It's hard to underestimate the importance of the tangible progress these awards represent. For, despite the clamor for environmental protection, two or three years ago you might have looked in vain for evidence of such forward movement.

Indeed, back in 1970 when we formed EPA, it was even difficult to know how to approach the problem. You would have found few, if any, answers--at the Federal level anyway--to simple sounding questions like what must I do, and when.

Environmental Improvement Award Dinner, Birmingham, Alabama, May 30, 1973

But time has passed, and now we are more sophisticated. We no longer ask such simple questions as these. We now have important and complex new laws to guide us. We have a far deeper appreciation for the economics of environmental protection, both costs and benefits. We are beginning to understand the web of relations between the environment and the great underlying issues of energy, land use, transportation, and population. And these are crucially important, exciting issues to contemplate. From them will surely spring the next wave of environmental legislation, and ultimately, the most rational solutions to problems of environmental degradation.

Now, exciting as are these thoughts to think, the trouble is we haven't really answered the questions you would have asked two years ago. While we begin to deal, as we must, with fundamental forces, we still haven't

proved that we can do the relatively simple job of cleaning up the pollution around us. To be sure, there is reason for hope--much reason for hope. But, as the President said in his environmental message, the problem for now remains to talk less and to do more.

So this morning I would like to discuss with you where we have been and what our chances of success are in solving the problem still urgently before us--to clean up the mess we have already made.

The past two years have been the time to make ready. In that sense, much has been done, but too little has been accomplished. The Clean Air Act and Federal Water Pollution Control Amendments have been passed. Systems and procedures have been set up. We have sued and we have been sued. And from this make ready time, a few new answers to the old questions begin to emerge.

Today, we understand two pivotal facts about the pollution problem. Most importantly we understand that we don't know all that much about it. We know for example that it is difficult to relate water quality standards to abatement requirements in all but the most obvious cases, because our techniques are just too unsophisticated. But we have decided that not knowing exactly how much clean up is required is no excuse for not requiring some clean up anyway.

We have also learned that not much can happen without a deadline. So we have deadlines. The Clean Air Act will clear the skies generally by 1975. The Water Act sets its first plateau for 1977 and a more stringent level of control for 1983.

These are tough, demanding, but obtainable deadlines. And even when the deadlines produce controversial results, they help focus attention on the problem. In Los Angeles, for example, meeting the ambient air quality standards for photochemical oxidants by 1977 may result in cutting back driving by 80% in some months of the year. That may not be possible, feasible, or desirable. But in striving toward that deadline--even if we don't make it--we will get a lot more air cleaned up than had we not tried at all.

We are also beginning to answer the question of what specifically is required of a discharger in cleaning up pollution. In the water program, we know that there will be a minimum abatement requirement based on available technology. The theory behind the water legislation is that we should try to clean up to the level the standards require, but, failing that, we should do what is practically possible. And the necessary facts are beginning to emerge to give life to this theory. Formally promulgated effluent guidelines will start coming off the production line in the next four to six months. But we have already assessed the technological possibilities in some industries, where our knowledge is sound and substantial.

In the case of air, the requirements by now are pretty well known. The State Implementation Plans have been approved or supplemented by Federal promulgation and contain detailed regulations laying out the requirements for all types of pollutant sources. And we are now in the process of developing compliance schedules for individual sources

that will place specific time and emission reduction requirements on each source. Birmingham is fortunate in being able to meet the 1975 standards deadline without transportation controls.

And finally, we can tell you whom to ask when an industry wants to know what it must do to meet the abatement requirements. In general, the answer is to ask the States first. In the Environmental Protection Agency, it is not only our commitment to the New Federalism, but also just plain common sense to rely on the States as the first line of defense. We are doing everything possible to bring that about.

In the air program, for example, States already have the helm. There are some Federal promulgations, but we are rescinding those as quickly as States are able to correct their own statutes and regulations.

We mean to turn over the water permit program to the states as quickly as possible. We have granted interim authority to virtually all States that have asked for it, and we are now beginning to receive applications for final delegation of the permit program. California has already received its final delegation, and we expect more soon.

But with or without a formal delegation of the permit authority under Federal law, the actual operation of the permit program will be as much a State operation as the States wish from the very beginning. EPA and the States must speak with one voice--in most cases, led by the States. We are trying not to get too excited over the legal nicety of who signs the permit. There will be a unified program from the outset; and we will clean up the legal delegation problems as quickly as possible.

Thus, the answers are beginning to firm up. They will be relatively precise within the year, but their outlines are clear now. And these answers describe the machinery that we will use to clean up pollution--if that can be done.

Today's question--the really substantial question--is whether the machinery will work. Will it in fact clean up pollution? If we can't do that simple job, who will trust us to tackle the more deep-rooted issues of land use and

energy and the like? If we can't answer yes to today's questions, we won't get a crack at tomorrow's.

I believe we can answer yes today more certainly than ever before.

The Water Pollution Control Act of 1972 is being implemented with all possible speed. EPA has already issued 180 permits regulating the effluents municipal and industrial installations may dump into our waterways. There are 750 draft permits in preparation and 250 public hearings have been held to get the views of citizens in communities throughout the land on how best to enforce this law for maximum effect. Soon our waters will be much cleaner--clean enough, in most areas, to swim in.

Progress toward cleaner air is even more impressive. In 76 of 172 urban areas we have evaluated over the past 12 years there has been a persistent decrease of harmful

particulate matter in the air. Some 84 areas did not change appreciably but only 12 got worse.

The same pattern is true of sulphur dioxide--in only one city in the nation between 1964 and 1971 did this deleterious compound consistently increase. Elsewhere it is either trending downward--as in 19 of 32 sites--or else staying the same.

It is notable that the worst affected cities have showed the most improvement: and all this progress is largely the result of state and local effort.

Now admittedly in the realm of auto emission controls we didn't do quite as well. Just to cite a typical case, we found that only 38% of 1971 models tested in Houston, Los Angeles and Detroit fell within the hydrocarbon and carbon monoxide ceilings mandated by law. However, these

controls are nevertheless gradually reducing the amount of exhaust emissions in the air. If they work properly we could achieve a 95% drop in automobile pollutants starting with 1976 model cars.

We have also made substantial progress in managing pesticides. During the first two years after EPA was established we initiated 172 legal actions under the old pesticide law, and thus cut down on the use of chemicals that produce the longest lasting effects on man and the balance of nature. With the new pesticides law we can fine-tune our regulations to make sure that pesticides are used when needed and not as a random measure. We can see to it that the consumer gets what he paid for but does not get exposed unnecessarily to powerful biocides.

Even in our solid waste program we have advanced well beyond our position two or three years ago. We have

trimmed back our programs precisely because of their substantial results. Virtually every state has developed a solid waste plan.

We have learned how to reduce the cost of municipal waste collection markedly--by as much as 40 percent in one case. We also know how to dispose of municipal trash safely and efficiently. And, as we turn Federal attention increasingly to the unanswered questions of toxic waste disposal and resource management, we will continue to help state and local governments put into practice the results we've already demonstrated together.

Finally, for all the progress we are beginning to see at the Federal level--progress I've just touched on--we know that it's really the kind of local initiative that you have exhibited here in Birmingham that will achieve real clean-up. More than anything else, it's the local success stories that make me certain we can win this fight.

The people of Oregon cleaned up the Willamette River on their own without any Federal help whatever. Once an open sewer, the Willamette is today so clean that salmon, a notoriously finicky species, are again making their run 100 miles upstream past the governor's mansion in Salem. San Diego cleaned up its splendid harbor without waiting for a Federal solution. And in New Hampshire the Winnepesaukee River is being turned into a new resource for fishing, boating and swimming, thanks to the get-up-and-go pioneer spirit of citizen groups. The examples are legion.

Reports pouring in from all over the country show that organizations like Birmingham's GASP have set in motion reforms that will result in salubrious air--not in a generation, not in a decade, but within three or four or five years. This trend is bound to improve the general health of the American public. Pollution control itself

is important, but it is also gratifying to know that one has helped oneself. That is hopeful news, for it may just mean that democracy still works.

We are all--you and I--part of the system that is suspect in American society today. We live under the suspicion that big government, big industry, and for that matter big religion and big education, can no longer respond to the human needs of this country.

Particularly at this troublesome time of charge and countercharge, of rhetoric and headlines, no one will believe that the system is good unless it produces results. That is the key to public distrust today. Every complaint, every excuse, every failure to produce only fuels the now-raging fires of distrust.

But that need not be, for I believe that Americans raised on the pragmatic will still respond to the pragmatic. We may no longer believe that a thing is good if it works, but we do still believe that if it works it can't be all bad.

I have said that in speeches maybe 50 times and I have always worried that maybe I was wrong. Now I am no longer so skeptical. I believe the evidence is at hand to show our system of environmental protection is working. And that is what is so important today in the experience of the city of Birmingham. You showed progress. You got proper credit for it.

And by that patient devotion to getting results for your hometown, you have brought us hope. That is a service which goes beyond the bounds of this city and this state. I thank you for it.

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